

Leadership

Begin with Trust

by Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss

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Holly Andres

Summary. Trust is the basis for almost everything we do. It's the foundation on which our laws and contracts are built. It's the reason we're willing to exchange our hard-earned paychecks for goods and services, to pledge our lives to another person in marriage, and to cast a... [more](#)

On a spring afternoon in 2017, Travis Kalanick, then the CEO of Uber, walked into a conference room at the company's Bay Area headquarters. One of us, Frances, was waiting for him. Meghan Joyce, the company's general manager for the United States and Canada, had reached out to us, hoping that we could guide the company as it sought to heal from a series of deep, self-inflicted

wounds. We had a track record of helping organizations, many of them founder-led, tackle messy leadership and culture challenges.



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We were skeptical about Uber. Everything we'd read about the company suggested it had little hope of redemption. At the time, the company was an astonishingly disruptive and successful start-up, but its success seemed to have come at the price of basic decency. In early 2017, for example, when taxi drivers went on strike in New York City to protest President Trump's travel ban, Uber appeared to have used tactics to profit from the situation—a move that prompted widespread outrage and a #deleteUber campaign. A month later, not long before the meeting, an Uber engineer named Susan Fowler had blogged courageously about her experiences of harassment and discrimination at the company, which caused more outrage. Footage of Kalanick had then emerged, in a video that went viral, of his interaction with an Uber driver, where he appeared dismissive of the pain of earning a living in a post-Uber world. Additional charges leveled at the company in this period reinforced Uber's reputation as a cold-blooded operator that would do almost anything to win.

Despite our skepticism, Frances had gone to California to hear Kalanick out. (Anne was building her own company at the time, so she took a back seat on the project.) As Frances waited for him to make his entrance, she braced herself for the smug CEO she'd read about. But that wasn't who walked in. Kalanick arrived humbled and introspective. He had thought a lot about how the cultural values he'd instilled in the company—the very values that had fueled Uber's success—had also been misused and distorted on his watch. He expressed deep respect for what his team had achieved but also acknowledged that he'd put some people in

leadership roles without giving them the training or mentorship to be effective. Whatever mistakes Kalanick had made up to that point, he revealed a sincere desire to do the right thing as a leader.

We regrouped back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and debated whether to take on the project. There were lots of reasons to stay far away from it. The work would be hard and its outcome uncertain, to say nothing of the brutal commute. Uber's workforce was frustrated, and the brand was becoming toxic. But we realized that if we could help get Uber back on the right path, then we could offer a road map to countless others trying to restore humanity to organizations that had lost their way. So we signed on.

After making that decision, we knew exactly where to start. With trust.

Empowerment Leadership

We think of trust as precious, and yet it's the basis for almost everything we do as civilized people. Trust is the reason we're willing to exchange our hard-earned paychecks for goods and services, pledge our lives to another person in marriage, cast a ballot for someone who will represent our interests. We rely on laws and contracts as safety nets, but even they are ultimately built on trust in the institutions that enforce them. We don't know that justice will be served if something goes wrong, but we have enough faith in the system that we're willing to make high-stakes deals with relative strangers.

Trust is also one of the most essential forms of capital a leader has. Building trust, however, often requires thinking about leadership from a new perspective. The traditional leadership narrative is all about you: your vision and strategy; your ability to make the tough calls and rally the troops; your talents, your charisma, your heroic moments of courage and instinct. But leadership really isn't about you. It's about empowering other people as a result of your presence, and about making sure that the impact of your leadership continues into your absence.

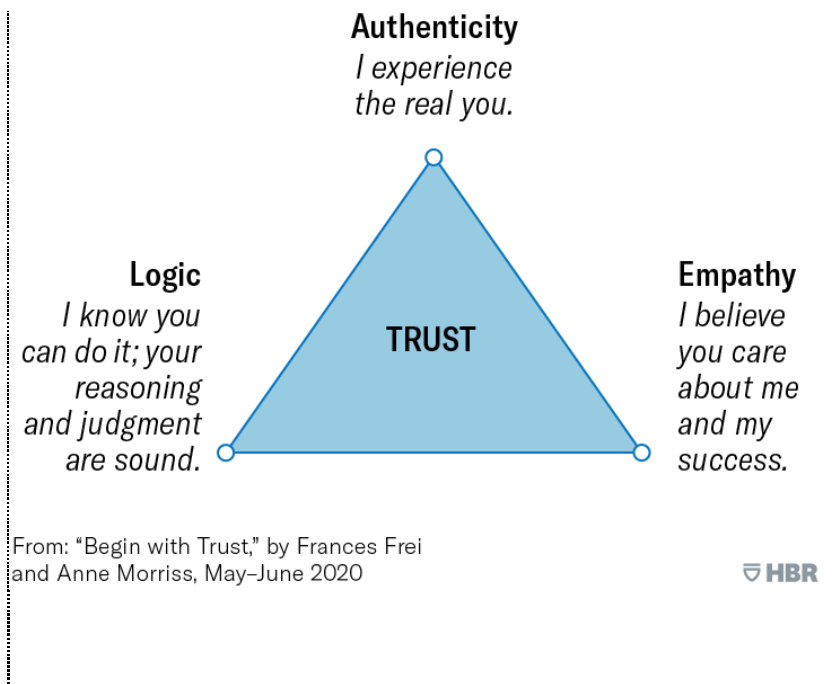
That's the fundamental principle we've learned in the course of dedicating our careers to making leaders and organizations better. Your job as a leader is to create the conditions for your people to fully realize their own capacity and power. And that's true not only when you're in the trenches with them but also when you're not around and even—this is the cleanest test—when you've permanently moved on from the team. We call it empowerment leadership. The more trust you build, the more possible it is to practice this kind of leadership.

The Core Drivers of Trust

So how do you build up stores of this foundational leadership capital? In our experience, trust has three core drivers: authenticity, logic, and empathy. People tend to trust you when they believe they are interacting with the real you (authenticity), when they have faith in your judgment and competence (logic), and when they feel that you care about them (empathy). When trust is lost, it can almost always be traced back to a breakdown in one of these three drivers.

The Trust Triangle

Trust has three drivers: authenticity, logic, and empathy. When trust is lost, it can almost always be traced back to a breakdown in one of them. To build trust as a leader, you first need to figure out which driver you “wobble” on.



People don't always realize how the information (or more often, the misinformation) that they're broadcasting may undermine their own trustworthiness. What's worse, stress tends to amplify the problem, causing people to double down on behaviors that make others skeptical. For example, they might unconsciously mask their true selves in a job interview, even though that's precisely the type of less-than-fully-authentic behavior that reduces their chance of being hired.

The good news is that most of us generate a stable pattern of trust signals, which means a small change in behavior can go a long way. In moments when trust is broken, or fails to get any real traction, it's usually the same driver that has gone wobbly on us—authenticity, empathy, or logic. We call this driver your "trust wobble." In simple terms, it's the driver that's most likely to fail you.

Everybody, it turns out, has a trust wobble. To build trust as a leader, you first need to figure out what yours is.

Build It, and They Will Come

To identify your wobble, think of a recent moment when you were not trusted as much as you wanted to be. Maybe you lost an important sale or didn't get a stretch assignment. Maybe someone simply doubted your ability to execute. With that moment in mind, do something hard: Give the other person in your story the benefit of the doubt. Let's call that person your "skeptic." Assume that your skeptic's reservations were valid and that you were the one responsible for the breakdown in trust. This exercise only works if you own it.

If you had to choose from our three trust drivers, which would you say went wobbly on you in this situation? Did your skeptic feel you were misrepresenting some part of yourself or your story? If so, that's an authenticity problem. Did your skeptic feel you might be putting your own interests first? If so, that's an empathy problem. Did your skeptic question the rigor of your analysis or your ability to execute on an ambitious plan? If so, that's a logic problem.

Withholding your true self puts a cap on trust and on your ability to lead.

Now stand back and try to look at your pattern of wobbles across multiple incidents. Pick three or four interactions that stand out to you, for whatever reason, and do a quick trust diagnostic for each one. What does your typical wobble seem to be? Does the pattern change under stress or with different kinds of stakeholders? For example, do you wobble on one trait with your direct reports but on a different one with people who have authority over you? That's not uncommon.

This exercise works best if you bring at least one person along for your diagnostic ride, ideally someone who knows you well. Sharing your analysis can be clarifying—even liberating—and will help you test and refine your hypothesis. In our experience, about 20% of self-assessments need a round of revision, so choose a

partner who can keep you honest. Consider going back and testing your analysis directly by speaking openly about it with your skeptic. This conversation alone can be a powerful way to rebuild trust. When you take responsibility for a wobble, you reveal your humanity (authenticity) and analytic chops (logic) while communicating your commitment to the relationship (empathy).

Overcoming Your Wobble

Over the past decade we've helped all kinds of leaders—from seasoned politicians to Millennial entrepreneurs to the heads of multibillion-dollar companies—wrestle with trust issues. In doing so, we've learned a lot about strategies you can deploy to overcome your own trust wobbles. Let's explore what's most effective for each of the drivers in our trust triangle.

Empathy.

Most high-achieving leaders struggle with this one. Signaling a lack of empathy is a major barrier to empowerment leadership. If people think you care more about yourself than about others, they won't trust you enough to lead them.

Empathy wobbles are common among people who are analytical and driven to learn. They often get impatient with those who aren't similarly motivated or who take longer than they do to understand something. Additionally, the tools and experience of the modern workplace continually distract or prevent us from demonstrating empathy, by imposing 24-hour demands on our time and putting at our disposal all sorts of technologies that compete for our attention at any given moment. Our beeping and buzzing devices constantly assert our self-importance, sometimes smack in the middle of interactions with the very people we're working to empower and lead.

We advise empathy wobblers to pay close attention to their behavior in group settings, particularly when other people have the floor. Consider what often happens in a meeting: When it

kicks off, most people feel very engaged. But as soon as empathy wobblers understand the concepts under discussion and have contributed their ideas, they lose interest. Their engagement plummets and remains low until the gathering (mercifully) comes to an end. Instead of paying attention, they often multitask, check their phones, engage in flamboyant displays of boredom—anything to make clear that this meeting is beneath them. Unfortunately, the cost of these indulgences is trust. If you signal that you matter more than everyone else, why should anyone trust the direction you're going in? What's in it for the rest of us to come along?



Holly Andres

There's a basic solution to this problem. Instead of focusing on what you need in that meeting, work to ensure that everyone else gets what they need. Take radical responsibility for the others in the room. Share the burden of moving the dialogue forward, even if it's not your meeting. Search for the resonant examples that will bring the concepts to life, and don't disengage until everyone else in the room understands. This is almost impossible to do if texting or checking email is an option, so put away your devices. Everyone knows you're not taking notes on their good ideas.

Indeed, the last thing we'll say on empathy is this: If you do nothing else to change your behavior, put away your phone more frequently. Put it truly away, out of sight and out of reach, not just flipped over for a few minutes at a time. You'll be amazed at the change in the quality of your interactions and your ability to build trust.

Logic.

If people don't always have confidence in the rigor of your ideas, or if they don't have full faith in your ability to deliver on them, then logic is probably your wobble. If they don't trust your judgment, why would they want you at the wheel?

When logic is the problem, we advise going back to the data. Root the case you're making in sound evidence, speak about the things you know to be true beyond a reasonable doubt, and then—this is the hard part—stop there. One reason Larry Bird was such an extraordinary basketball player was that he only took shots he knew he could reliably make. That choice made him different from other great players who let ego and adrenaline cloud their shooting judgment. Bird studied and practiced so relentlessly that by the time the ball left his hands in the heat of competition, he knew exactly where it was going. If logic is your wobble, take Bird's example and learn to “play within yourself.”

Once you get comfortable with how that feels, start expanding what you know. Along the way, make an effort to learn from other people. Their insight is among your most valuable resources, but to access it, you must be willing to reveal that you don't have all the answers—something leaders often resist. Engaging people about their experience has the additional benefit of communicating who you are and what energizes you professionally—an authenticity boost.

For most logic wobblers, however, rigor isn't the issue. Much of the time, the problem is the perception of wobbly logic rather than the reality of it. Why does this happen? Because they're not communicating their ideas effectively.

There are generally two ways to communicate complex thoughts. The first takes your audience on a journey, with twists and turns and context and dramatic tension, until they eventually get to the payoff. Many of the world's best storytellers use this technique. You can visualize this approach by imagining an inverted triangle. The journeying storyteller starts at the top, at the inverted base of the triangle, and traces an enchantingly meandering route down to its point.

Leadership begins not when others trust you but when you trust yourself.

If logic is your wobble, however, that's a risky path to take. With all that circuitous journeying, you're likely to lose your audience along the way rather than build trust in your judgment. Listeners may even abandon you at one of your narrative turns.

To avoid that, try flipping the imaginary triangle upright. Start with your main point, or headline, at the top of the triangle, and then work your way down, building a base of reinforcing evidence. This approach signals a clarity of vision and a full command of the facts. Everyone has a much better chance of following your logic. Even if you get interrupted along the way, you'll at least have had a chance to communicate your key idea.

Authenticity.

If people feel they're not getting access to the "real" you—to a full and complete accounting of what you know, think, and feel—then you probably have an authenticity wobble.

A quick test: How different is your professional persona from the one that shows up around family and friends? If there's a sharp difference, what are you getting in return for masking or minimizing certain parts of yourself? What's the payoff?

Being your “real self” sounds nice in theory, but there can be powerful reasons for holding back certain truths. The calculation can be highly practical at times, if wrenching—as in deciding to stay closeted in a workplace that’s hostile to queer identities. There may also be times when expressing your authentic feelings may risk harmful consequences: Women, for example, are disproportionately penalized for displaying negative emotions in the workplace, and black men are burdened by the false stereotype that they are predisposed to anger. We’re not talking here about moments of prudent self-censorship, which sometimes can’t be divorced from a larger context of bias or low psychological safety. Instead, we’re talking about inauthenticity as a strategy, a way of navigating the workplace. If this is how you operate, you’re dealing with an authenticity wobble.

In our experience, although withholding your true self may sometimes help you solve problems in the short term, it puts an artificial cap on trust and, by extension, on your ability to lead. When people sense that you’re concealing the truth or being less than authentic, they’re far less willing to make themselves vulnerable to you in the ways that leadership demands.

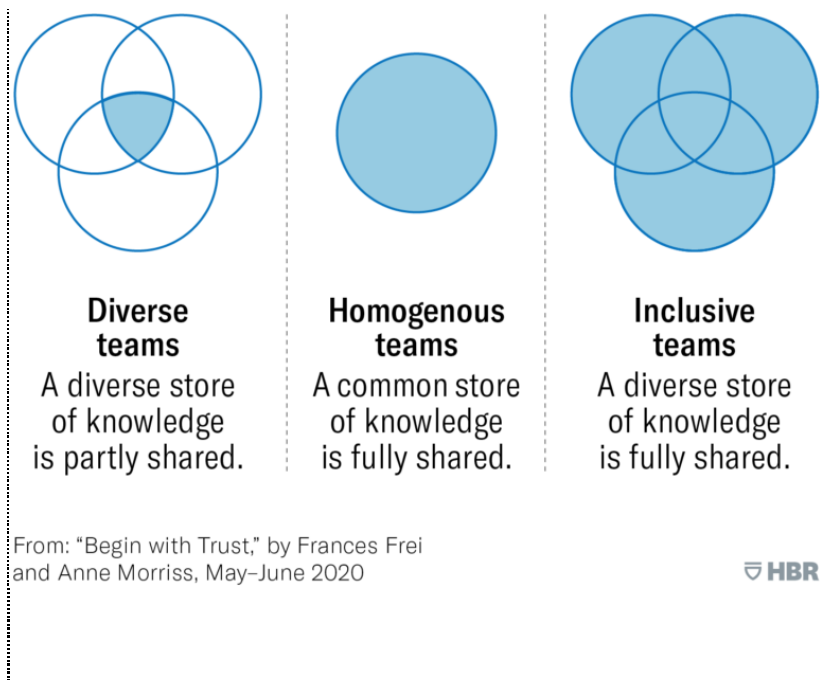
We’ve observed the cost of inauthenticity up close in the performance of diverse teams. Diversity can be a tremendous asset in today’s marketplace, and the companies that get it right often enjoy powerful competitive tailwinds. But this advantage isn’t automatic. Simply populating your team with diverse perspectives and experiences doesn’t always translate into better performance. In fact, the uncomfortable truth is that diverse teams can underperform homogenous teams if they’re not managed actively for differences among members. That is due in part to a phenomenon called the *common information effect*, which works like this: As human beings, we tend to focus on the things we have in common with other people. We tend to seek out and affirm our shared knowledge, because it confirms our value and kinship with the group. Diverse teams, by definition, have less common information readily available to them to use in collective decision-making.

Consider two teams of three people, one in which the three members are different from one another, and the other in which they're similar. If both teams are managed in exactly the same way—if they simply follow the same best practices in group facilitation, for example—the homogenous team is likely to perform better. No amount of feedback or number of trust falls can overcome the strength of the common information effect.

But the effect only holds if people wobble on authenticity. When they choose to bring their unique selves to the table—that is, the parts of themselves that are different from other people—they can create an unbeatable advantage by expanding the amount of information the team can access. The result is an inclusive team that's likely to outperform (by a long shot) both homogenous teams and diverse teams that aren't actively managed for inclusion.

Trust, Diversity, and Team Performance

Diversity doesn't automatically confer advantages in decision-making. In fact, if diverse teams aren't managed actively for inclusion, they can underperform homogenous ones. That's because shared knowledge is key in decision-making, and diverse teams, by definition, start out with less of it. But if you create conditions of trust that allow diverse team members to bring their unique perspectives and experiences to the table, you can expand the amount of knowledge your team can access—and create an unbeatable advantage.



This expansion of knowledge and its obvious benefits rely on the courage of authenticity wobblers. We know how difficult sharing who we really are can be, and we also know that it's sometimes too much to ask. But if we regularly give in to the pressure to hold back our unique selves, then we suppress the most valuable parts of ourselves. Not only do we end up concealing the very thing the world needs most from us—our differences—but we also make it harder for people to trust us as leaders.

Here's the reason to care, even if you don't see yourself as different: All of us pay the price of inauthentic interactions, and all of us have a better chance of thriving in inclusive environments where authenticity can flourish. Gender bias, in other words, is not just a woman's problem. Systemic racism is not just an African-American or Latinx problem. It's our shared moral and organizational imperative to create workplaces where the burdens of being different are shouldered by all of us. After all, we will all benefit wildly from eliminating them.

One of the lessons we've learned in our work with organizations is that creating spaces where authenticity can thrive is not as hard as it may seem. It is an urgent, achievable goal that requires far less audacity than disrupting industries or growing complex

organizations—things leaders do every day with deep conviction in the outcomes. If all of us take responsibility for creating companies where difference can thrive, and all of us take responsibility for showing up in them authentically, then our chances of achieving true inclusion—and building high levels of trust—start to look pretty good.

So pay less attention to what you think people want to hear and more attention to what you need to say to them. Reveal your full humanity to the world, regardless of what your critics say. And while you're at it, take exquisite care of people who are different from you, confident in the knowledge that their difference is the very thing that could unleash your potential and your organization's.

In Myself I Trust

We've argued that the foundation of empowerment leadership is getting other people to trust you. That's certainly true, but there's one last thing you need to know. The path to empowerment leadership doesn't begin when other people start to trust you. It begins when you start to trust yourself.

To be a truly empowering leader, you need to take stock of where you wobble not only in your relationships with others but also in your relationship with yourself. Are you being honest with yourself about your ambitions, or are you ignoring what really excites and inspires you? If you're hiding something from yourself, you've got an authenticity problem you need to address. Do you acknowledge your own needs and attend properly to them? If not, you've got to adopt a more empathetic posture toward yourself. Do you lack conviction in your own ideas and ability to perform? If so, you've got some logic issues to work out.

Doing this work is important as a leader, for an arguably obvious reason. If you don't trust yourself, why should anybody else trust you?

A Campaign to Rebuild Trust

Let's now return to Uber. When we began working with the company, it was certainly wobbling—so much so that we diagnosed it as “a hot mess.”

What was going on?

Consider the basic trust-related facts. There's no question that Uber had empathy problems. The company's focus on growth at all costs meant that relationships with stakeholders, particularly drivers and employees, needed real attention. Riders also needed to be assured that their safety wouldn't come second to the company's financial performance. Additionally, despite its disruptive success, Uber hadn't answered questions about the long-term viability of its business model or about whether its managers had the skills to lead an organization of its expansive scale and scope. These were unaddressed logic problems. Finally, the company's war-room mentality was undermining its authenticity. In the “us versus them” culture at Uber, people were skeptical that they were getting the full story.



By the time Frances began working with Kalanick, he had already begun making changes to steady the company's trust wobbles. He had hired Eric Holder, for example, who had served as U.S. attorney general under President Obama, to lead a rigorous internal investigation into harassment and discrimination—and when Holder made a sweeping set of recommendations, Kalanick took action to implement them. The company was also on the verge of rolling out new driver-tipping functionality, which would go on to generate \$600 million in additional driver compensation in the first year of its launch. New safety features were in development, too, designed to give both drivers and riders additional tools to protect themselves.

Kalanick didn't get the chance to see most of these initiatives to completion, at least not from the CEO chair. In June 2017, he was forced out as CEO, although he retained his board seat and an equity stake in the company until December 2019, when he gave both up. He was ultimately replaced by Dara Khosrowshahi, the former Expedia CEO, who had a track record of effective leadership at the helm of young companies.

Frances soon began working with Khosrowshahi to continue the campaign to rebuild trust internally. Together they led an effort to rewrite the company's cultural values, one that invited input from all 15,000 employees on the principles that they wanted Uber to live by. The new motto they settled on was "We do the right thing. Period." Other early trust wins for Khosrowshahi included strengthening relationships with regulators and executing a logic-driven focus on the services and markets that were most defensible.

Most of the work we did during this period was aimed at rebuilding trust at the employee level. Some things were easy to identify and fix, like ratcheting down the widespread, empathy-pulverizing practice of texting during meetings about the other people in the meeting, a tech-company norm that shocked us when we first experienced it. We introduced a new norm of

turning off all personal technology and putting it away during meetings, which forced people to start making eye contact with their colleagues again.

Other challenges were harder to tackle, like the need to upskill thousands of managers. Our take was that Uber had underinvested in its people during its period of hypergrowth, leaving many managers unprepared for the increasing complexity of their jobs. We addressed this logic wobble with a massive infusion of executive education, using a virtual classroom to engage employees in live case discussions—our pedagogy of choice—whether they were in San Francisco, London, or Hyderabad. Although our pilot program was voluntary and classes were sometimes scheduled at absurdly inconvenient times, 6,000 Uber employees based in more than 50 countries each participated in 24 hours of instruction over the course of 60 days. It was an extraordinary pace, scale, and absorption of management education.

The curriculum gave people tools and concepts to develop quickly as leaders while flipping a whole lot of upside-down communication triangles. Employees gained the skills not only to listen better but also to talk in ways that made it easier to collaborate across business units and geographies. Frances went out in the field, visiting key global offices in her first 30 days on the job, carving out protected spaces to listen to employees and communicate leadership's commitment to building a company worthy of its people. At a time when many employees were conflicted about their Uber affiliations, Frances made it a point to wear an Uber T-shirt every day until the entire company was proud to be on the payroll.

Within a year, Uber was less wobbly. There were still problems to be solved, but indicators such as employee sentiment, brand health, and driver compensation were all heading in the right direction, and the march toward an IPO began in earnest. Good people were deciding to stay with the company, more good people were joining, and, in what had become our favorite indicator of

progress, an increasing number of Uber T-shirts could now be spotted on city streets. It was all a testament to the talent, creativity, and commitment to learning at every level of the organization—and to the new foundation of trust that Kalanick and Khosrowshahi had been able to build.

Editor's Note: Frances Frei received shares in Uber as compensation for her work with the company, which she continues to hold.

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